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ABSTRACT

To be effective in teaching students employability skills, instructors in corrections education must teach the skills directly in vocational classrooms. The instructors should use a vocabulary system that focuses on specific behaviors and attitudes. They should also be aware that there can be stages of growth involved in acquiring appropriate employability skills. Awareness of this progression helps in incorporating employability skills into the classroom. The levels in a taxonomy of acquisition of appropriate work habits and attitudes are awareness, responsiveness according to that awareness, valuing, and characterization. If instructors follow this process, they can incorporate employability skills directly into the curriculum in the vocational classroom. Two main elements of effective implementation of the program are thorough orientation to these skills and regular feedback to the students on their growth related to them. (YLB)

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INCORPORATING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS INTO THE VOCATIONAL CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of vocational education is to provide individuals with the skills they need to acquire jobs in their chosen vocational areas. Helping students to learn the skills specific to their chosen field is the major emphasis of the training; however, it is also important that they be taught general employability skills. These are the work habits and attitudes that make a person a desirable and dependable employee.

Many vocational instructors are concerned that their students acquire these skills, but they have difficulty incorporating them into the classrooms. (They are concerned not only so that the students may keep jobs later but also so that they may make effective use of their learning opportunities while still enrolled in training.) Such concern is warranted. It does a person little benefit to have strong occupational skills unless that person is able to work in accordance with the habits and attitudes that are needed to keep a job. Also, many students will choose at some later time to change careers to new areas. When this happens, general employability skills will still be directly beneficial to them.

Concerns about employability skills are even more crucial in corrections education where the restrictions of a corrections setting often interfere with placing students in training programs that match well with their individual interests and abilities. Further, in corrections classrooms many of the students are being exposed for the

first time to the types of daily work routines that are expected of dependable employees.

In order to be effective in teaching students employability skills, instructors must address the skills directly. It is not enough to include these skills in the grading system; employability skills must be taught directly. The purpose of this paper is to provide direction for those instructors who wish to incorporate the teaching of employability skills into their vocational classrooms.

DESCRIPTIVE VOCABULARY

Before employability skills can be addressed effectively in the classroom, it is important to have a descriptive way to discuss them. It is not as important that an absolute language be developed as it is that words are used that focus on specific behaviors and attitudes rather than on general concepts. Table 1 provides a list of terms that are helpful in describing specific social habits, occupational interests and capabilities, and learning styles and preferences. The list is taken from material by Brolin (1987) and Gemmill and Kiss.

Related to using terminology that focuses on specific behaviors and attitudes is the idea of distinguishing between describing a person's work habits and attitudes on one hand and drawing conclusions about them on the other. This is not to say that it is necessarily wrong to draw conclusions about a person's behavior but rather to say that it is more useful to convey descriptions of these rather than to convey only

Table 1

VOCABULARY OF EMPLOYABILITY BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES

SOCIAL HABITS

absence of supervision - works at a consistent rate when unsupervised; works well without direct, continuous supervision

acceptance of supervision - recognizes importance of supervision

appearance - dresses appropriate to the situation; well groomed

appropriate behavior - exhibits suitable gestures, verbalizations, actions, mannerisms, etc.

attentiveness - listens to directions; follows instructions; attends to task as required

character - considered dependable by peers and others

conformity - accepts rules and regulations whether or not he/she agrees with them

cooperativeness - cooperates with peers and others for the accomplishment of a group task

distractibility - stays on task when others are nearby or after experiencing non-work related problems

loyalty - never or rarely complains about peers, teachers, others, or tasks

punctuality - is on time regularly for activities and events; accepts responsibility for tardiness

responsibility - assumes and carries out tasks in a dependable manner

safety - demonstrates a concern for and takes appropriate action to maintain safe conditions

seeks help - requests assistance from others and/or peers when encountering difficulty

Table 1 (cont.)

self-initiation - initiates work on task promptly and without the urging of others

OCCUPATIONAL INTERESTS AND CAPABILITIES

work adjustment capability - adjusts to and performs tasks under the following conditions:

1. frequent changes in duties
2. assignment of specific tasks which seldom require independent action or judgment
3. working apart from others
4. stressful, unexpected or risk taking situations
5. making judgments and decisions on subjective criteria, e.g., feeling and common sense
6. results of work are tangible or intangible

LEARNING STYLES AND PREFERENCES

motivation - displays high levels of interest and initiative

nutritional intake - needs to eat/drink only at the normal established times for breakfast, lunch, and dinner

persistence - attends tasks consistently

responsibility - shows dependability and conscientiousness

social - works well in small and large peer groups; with staff; and with peers and staff together

structure - organizes own work

the conclusions drawn about them. For example, the statement "John is a good worker" is a conclusion and gives very little information. A more helpful description is shown below.

> John impresses me as a conscientious worker for a number of reasons. First, he is rarely absent or late for class. Second, he constantly keeps on task in the shop. Also, he

takes the intitiative to ask questions whenever he has difficulties with his work.

RECOGNIZING PROGRESS

When dealing with students' employability skills, it is not easy to recognize when progress is being made. This happens partly because it is easy to slip into the mindset that these skills are ones that people either demonstrate or they do not, that possession of them is a "black and white" issue. However, there are stages of growth that a person may be guided through in acquiring these skills. Awareness of this progression will help in incorporating the skills into the classroom.

The progression is based on the taxonomy of affective educational objectives developed by Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1964). Employability skills can be appropriately matched with this taxonomy because they deal with a person's attitudes and values. In general, the taxonomy shows that affective objectives can be classified beginning with ones that seek to provide awareness in the students to ones that seek for students to show commitment to an underlying value and eventually to ones that aim at the development of a personality (characterization) based on a complex value system. The discussion below demonstrates how concepts of the taxonomy can be applied to developing students' employability skills.

The first level in acquiring appropriate work habits and attitudes is to become aware of them. Typically this would involve paying

attention during a classroom presentation when such issues are described. For example, a student who listens attentively when the instructor discusses safety rules for shop areas can be taking the first step toward becoming a safety-conscious worker.

Once a student's awareness of one or more of appropriate employability skills has been raised, the next step is responding according to that awareness. Here the person will act in accordance with the issue being presented. An example of this is when a student dresses in a way deemed suitable for a training program. It is important to note that compliance with an issue (such as appropriate dress) does not necessarily indicate acknowledging the worth of doing so. A person is considered "responding" whether or not that person agrees that it is "good" to do so.

The agreement of the worth of a habit or attitude is a sign of the next step, valuing. To be truly at this step, an individual will be motivated by a personal commitment to an underlying value rather than by the desire to obey or comply with the instructor. During this stage of growth, a student will show a willingness to be associated with a certain value. One way that growth to this step may be shown is by one student's encouraging another to work according to a desirable habit such as accepting the instructor's supervision on a project.

Once the student has reached this point, it can be said that that student does indeed possess the particular value or values (employability skills) that have been intended. Further growth can still be shown, though, by a person's organization of an entire system

of values (with appropriate priority given to the intended values) and the overall characterization according to this system. At the characterization stage, the total nature of the individual will be affected by the values system.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DIRECT APPLICATION IN THE CLASSROOM

By using a vocabulary system that focuses on specific behaviors and by being aware that there can be stages of growth involved in acquiring appropriate employability skills, instructors can incorporate employability skills directly into the curriculum in the vocational classroom. Two main elements of this are thorough orientation to these skills and regular feedback to the students on their growth related to them.

When students first enter their vocational training classes, they can be made aware of the specific employability skills that they will be expected to acquire and of the importance of the skills. This can be done by presenting the students with a list such as is shown in Table 1. Another approach that may be more effective is to start by having students describe characteristics of good workers and explain why those characteristics are desirable. The instructor can then build on what they present if necessary. The important factor is that the specific habits and attitudes that are expected are presented directly to the students.

Along with presenting the skills themselves, the instructor should explain how and when the students will be rated according to the skills.

Explaining the details of the ratings will provide the students assurance that they have control over the ratings they will receive. It also helps to emphasize the importance that the instructor is placing on the skills.

Once students are aware of the habits and attitudes expected of them, regular feedback should be given on their growth in each of the areas presented. One means of doing this is to use an evaluation form such as the one shown in Figure 1. The form lists the skills that have been identified as being important and shows different stages of growth toward consistent display of each skill. While many students will enter the classroom already possessing good employability skills, the form allows for them to start unaware of these values. They then progress by gaining awareness of the issue, acknowledging the importance of it, sometimes displaying the appropriate characteristic, and finally displaying the characteristic consistently. The form closely parallels the first three levels of affective objectives discussed above. Descriptions of each skill mentioned in the form should accompany the report. (The descriptions have been given previously in Table 1.)

The importance of regular feedback on these habits and attitudes needs to be stressed. Unless students are aware that the skills are more than just something the instructor talks about once in a while they are not likely to strive to acquire them. It is suggested that the instructor determine a regular interval, such as every month or every grading period, at which feedback will be given to each student on progress in these areas. By using a written form such as the one in

Figure 1

EMPLOYABILITY EVALUATION

SKILL AREA	Unawareness	Awareness	Acknowledgement	Displays Sometimes	Displays Consistently
Absence of Supervision					
Acceptance of Supervision					
Attendance					
Conformity					
Cooperativeness					
Non-distractibility					
Punctuality					
Responsibility					
Safety					
Self-initiative					
Persistence					
Structure					
Work Adjustment Capability					

Unawareness - Student is not aware of the issue

Awareness - Student is aware of the issue

Acknowledgement - Student acknowledges that issue is important

Displays Sometimes - Student sometimes displays this characteristic

Displays Consistently - Student consistently displays this characteristic

Figure 1 students will be able to compare their growth with what was shown on the previous report. But more than just written feedback should be used. The instructor should strive to personally explain the ratings to each student, emphasizing strengths and areas where growth was noted as well as areas where further improvement is needed. Taking such time to talk with students personally communicates concern for the individual.

In a corrections setting it may be helpful to keep initial reports confidential between the student and the instructor rather than entering them into the person's institution file. This way the individual can feel more free to acknowledge the need for growth without being concerned that potentially negative reports will be seen by people who make decisions about the person's institution status and parole date.

CONCLUSION

Students have much to benefit from the incorporation of employability skills into the vocational classroom. In order for this to be done effectively, though, several factors must be addressed in the process. First, the appropriate habits and attitudes must be dealt with directly and not just given casual attention. Second, clear descriptions of habits and attitudes should be used. Also, instructors must be aware that there can be gradual stages of growth through which students progress as they acquire these skills. Finally, the program must be implemented in a way that makes clear to students what is expected of them and that provides regular feedback on their growth.

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